Our Theory Split

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Near the beginning of his classic work of historiography, *The History of the Maghrib: An Interpretive Essay*, Moroccan thinker Abdallah Laroui inserts a footnote about a study of the region by a Harvard-based American author who refers to North Africa as "no idea producing area,"[1] a statement that Laroui thoroughly dismantles in a couple of sentences. In this short note at the start of a book written forty years ago, Laroui pinpoints the central problem in U.S.-based studies of the Arab region. The historically contested nature of knowledge production in the field cannot be ignored in any attempt to address the question of critical theory's influence on Arabic literature in the American academy.

Literary studies in general in the United States had undergone a profound paradigm shift in the years before we, the contributors to this forum, began our graduate training, and these changes eventually came to be felt in all areas of the humanities and social sciences. This new approach to the way literature is analyzed constitutes a second unavoidable dimension of the issue addressed by this forum. As familiar as the history of continental theory's arrival in the U.S. academy might be, we are compelled to remember it in order to fully address the question at hand. The argument in favor of self-consciously theoretical approaches took many forms, but one main line of argument was that theoretical approaches were already implicit in every study of a literary work. There has always been method in literary analyses of Arabic literature, for example. Even those early studies that educated the American reader about works of fiction written in Arabic by retelling the main events of the plot (as though such a summary actually captured anything about the way the text created meaning) were asserting—even without realizing it—a theory of fiction that radically centered the meaning of the work within its *histoire*, or story. Everyone uses theory, but only theoreticians willingly admit that they do. This truth was the basic tenet behind the movement that provoked what has variously been called the "theory split," "the structuralist controversy," or "the French revolution" that polarized literary studies in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s and profoundly questioned how literary texts make meaning.

Thus far, I have mentioned two factors central to literary theory's influence on the study of Arabic literature in the United States. They are the classical prejudice against intellectual production from the Arab region within Orientalist and area studies discourses about the Middle East, and the revolutionary turn to theoretical paradigms—especially ones derived from "continental" thought—in U.S. literary studies during the 1970s and 1980s. For a generation of scholars working on Arabic literature from inside U.S. graduate programs, the deep conflict between these two historical realities meant living within an almost stultifying contradiction. Even though the European-ness of the new paradigms reminded us of the Eurocentrism that had always haunted the study of the Arab world, we often kept these reservations to ourselves at that time, mostly because voicing

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them meant aligning ourselves with the most reactionary elements within literature departments in the United States against the new wave.

No single figure symbolizes, undergirds, and provokes this contradiction more than Edward W. Said. For Said managed to promote the serious, sustained, and creative study of Michel Foucault, among other continental thinkers, arguing in *Orientalism* and other earlier works for the usefulness of the new paradigms in dismantling colonial discourse and its latter-day American versions even as he simultaneously worked to create a space for the Arab narrative *ex nihilo*[2] in the American public sphere. His work exposed the old cliché that "the East proposes and the West disposes" at the same time that it reinforced it.

To answer the question of how the study of Arabic literature has been influenced by critical theory is, for me, to analyze and narrativize the working out of this contradiction by a generation of critics who were profoundly influenced by Said's work, even though in its prodigious expansiveness it was frustratingly thin in helpful statements regarding Arabic literature. In considering this history recently, I found myself amazed at how a generation of scholars had made the "colonial discourse" paradigm relevant—through adaptation and redeployment—to the study of postcolonial Arabic literature (even though it had initially been intended exclusively for the purpose of studying European and American discourses critically). Much of this transformation was accomplished in works published by my copanelists in this forum, but many others—including scholars older than us, ones younger than us, and ones in other disciplines—contributed to these methodological innovations. Furthermore, once postcolonial studies was adapted to become relevant for the study of Arabic literature, theoretical approaches to this material proliferated, including many studies that made significant methodological contributions having nothing to do with Said or postcolonialism.

Recently, I attempted an analysis of these new Said-influenced trends in the literary study of the Arab world.[3] While thoroughly impressed by the creativity of this generation of critics, I found myself in the end taking a position that Emil Habibi might have described as "pessoptimistic."[4] I did so because I believe the contradiction I have been describing still haunts our work, despite the innovations of my colleagues. For some, the solution to the problem of the contested history around ideas in our field is to flee theory through "new" versions of old paradigms—new new critical, new empirical, new historical, et al. I believe our disciplinary history does not afford us the luxury of fully engaging with recent currents in critical thought toward "post-theory," a "return to the literary" (as though the literary is nowhere to be found in the work of Jameson, Spivak, or de Man), or cultural history.

A double bind reasserts itself. If we ignore these trends, we are old-fashioned area specialists; if we embrace them, we have taken too casually the problem initially pointed to by Laroui and Said. Both thinkers understood that the problem was more than a mere prejudice, that it included an institutional dimension. An American proponent of "post theory" working on Wallace Stevens is situated differently—both institutionally and geopolitically—from a critic in the United States writing about Arabic literature. The Stevens critic's work may even in an indirect way destabilize the entrenched symbolic capital surrounding the category of "theory," but for studies of Arabic literature this is not yet possible. I am encouraged by the excellent work being done by scholars of Arabic literature in the United States who are focused on paradigms rooted in the language,

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history, and politics of the region. My pessoptimism comes from a sense that if this excellent work is not conjoined with a sustained attention to ideas and methods, we have too abruptly abandoned the task of re-creating the Arab world in the mind's eye of our American audience, who may still see it as the region that does not produce—or engage—ideas.

NOTES

[1]Abdallah Laroui, *The History of the Maghreb: An Interpretive Essay*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 23n1.

[2]There was almost *no* representation of the Arab narrative in the United States by the late 1970s.

[3]Hosam Aboul-Ela, "Is There an Arab (Yet) in this Field?: Postcolonialism, Comparative Literature, and the Middle Eastern Horizon of Said's Discourse Analysis," *Modern Fiction Studies* 26 (2010): 729–50. Full disclosure: a reading of a draft of this article by a copanelist in this forum and our ensuing e-mail debate provoked the present discussion.

[4]Emil Habibi, *al-Waqa'i' al-Ghariba fi Ikhtifa' Sa'id Abi al-Nahs al-Mutasha'il* (The Strange Chronicle of the Disappearance of Sa'id Abi al-Nahs the Pessoptimist) (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1998).

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